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Local Government Communicated Information and Citizens' Information Preference in Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Needed information is more acceptable than other information forced on people. This paper was built upon this premise and therefore went to investigate the type of information citizens of local governments in Imo State, Nigeria wanted as against what the local government communicates to them. Thirteen out of 27 local governments in Imo State were surveyed by the use of questionnaire. 1840 respondents were proportionally selected from the 13 purposively selected local government areas, among the government's lawful working age group. Analysing the retrieved questionnaire, using discrete numbers and percentages, it was discovered that financial information, which the citizens needed most from their local governments, were minimized. Citizens would like to get information on all the activities of the local governments. The most preferred information by the citizens includes information about government finances, job creation, establishment of companies, and training of citizens. The local governments, on the other hand, provided more information on need to pay taxes, licenses, rates, and elections. It is recommended that local governments should release to their citizens all information about their activities because local government information is a public information.

Key Words: Citizens, Information dissemination, Financial information communication, Preferred information, Local government area, Needed information.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Imo State is one of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It was created on February 3, 1976 out from the old East Central State (when Nigeria was made up of only 12 states). Abia State was carved out of Imo State in 1991 leaving Imo State then with a population of 2, 485, 635. The official population of Imo State according to 2006 census is 3, 934, 899 (National Population Commission, 2008). As at the year 2012, Imo State is made up of 27 local government areas divided into three Senatorial zones namely: Owerri Senatorial zone, made up of nine local governments; Okigwe Senatorial zone, made up of six local governments; and Orlu Senatorial zone, made up of twelve local governments.

The local governments in Imo state, just like the other states of the federation, have failed to provide basic amenities like electricity, health care facilities, good roads and portable water for the citizenry. Moreover, the citizens are largely unaware of the income accruing to the local government authorities and how they are spent. These resources, if properly managed, are supposed to generate employment both in the public and private sectors.

Information can be used as a means to propagate transparency in the conduct of local government affairs in Nigeria. Financial information dissemination is perceived to be a deterrent to mismanagement of resources experienced in some Nigerian local governments which has hindered development all over the years. However, the focus of this research is on information communicated by the local government to its citizens and the type of information the citizens actually want to be communicated to them.

Information communication can be a deterrent to misappropriation of funds or embezzlement. So, it is important that citizens be aware of what the government gets and how they spend the monies received and generated. This will help in reducing corruption and instilling transparency.

Nigerian citizens, particularly those concerned with information generation, dissemination and use, heaved a sigh of relief with the passing of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law by the Nigerian government in 2011. Almost all Nigerian newspapers reported it on their front cover pages of June 1, 2011 (Taiwo and Dunia, (2011); Nwankwo and Chiedozie, (2011); Samuel and Adewole, (2011). With the passage of FOI bill into law, "Nigerians

finally have vital tools to uncover facts, fight corruption and hold officials and institutions accountable” (Enonche, 2011). The bill will be anti-corruption, improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public institutions, support justice and ensure more open society.

For governments to be transparent, information must flow freely to the citizens. There has to be open access to information. In Open Access to Information, Brown and Swanson (2003: 2- 3) stated:

Open access to information is the fifth characteristic of catalytic community development. [I think not in order of importance but on numerical position on the paper]. Often state and federal government, universities, and non-profit organizations have invaluable information, but communities are unaware of it or have no access to it. More development is needed to make this information available to rural communities. Effective deployment of broadband technology is an important starting point.

Communities’ awareness, access to and use of information is crucial in the development of local government areas in Imo State. The citizens’ reactions to events in the communities in Imo State raise a big doubt to their awareness of the finances of their local governments. For instance, they refuse to do the monthly environmental clean-up because they feel the local governments have enough funds to buy refuse disposal vehicles and to hire workers to clean the streets. What if this is not true and the citizens held to the rumour because they were not communicated?

Information communication is one thing and communicating the needed information is another. Every time news about things happening in the local governments is aired from radio and television stations, many of them owned and controlled by the government. They announce what they want the citizens to hear and often times they praise their invisible achievements; at other times they blow what they have done out of proportion. What information are the local governments passing to their citizens and what information do the citizens want to hear about?

Information could be used to target areas of improvement in a society or in an organization. According to Bluestein (2010), information that is provided to or obtained by local governments has become public record and anyone could have access to such information since local governments are public ventures. With the foregoing, local government’s financial records should be made accessible to all for transparency.

Psychologically, if the local government authorities know that the citizens are aware of the finances that accrue in the local governments by the citizens’ participation in local government affairs, there is the likelihood that they will be more open with the use of such funds. The local government authorities might make conscious efforts to prevent the citizens from being aware of the local government’s finances. On the other hand they may utilize the resources for the benefit of the community. By this awareness, local government authority’s attitudes and behaviour might change.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

General observation has shown that citizens of local government areas in Imo State were not aware neither were they informed, of what accrued to their local governments from the federal government, the state government, or what was internally generated and how the allocations were spent. The citizens were detached from their local government by non participation in local government affairs. Thus, the rate of development seems not to be proportionate to the rumoured allocations made to the local governments. The citizens complained that funds allocated to the local government areas had either been misappropriated or embezzled by the chairman of the local government and his subordinates. They believed that the government was not open enough, particularly as it concerned financial matters, to the citizens. They were not sure of what the funds allocated or generated from the local governments were used for. This study, therefore investigates the true state of affairs in Imo State as it pertains to how local governments communicate financial and other information to their citizens, the level of awareness of citizens of this information, and the extent of relevance of such disseminated information to the citizens. **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objective of this study is to survey the type of information the local governments disseminate to their citizens vis-a-vis the type of information the citizens like to receive.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. determine the types of information local governments’ pass to the citizens in Imo State;
2. ascertain the citizens’ preferred type of information they would like to receive from the local government;
3. find out the relationship between local governments’ financial information communication and citizenry preferred financial information in Imo State.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In other to get answers to achieve the objectives of this study, the following questions are asked:

- 1 What type of information do local governments give to their citizens in Imo State?

- 2 What type of information do the citizens want from their local governments?
- 3 What is the relationship between local governments' disseminated information and citizens' preferred information?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Information awareness is one of the ways to fight corruption and people need to know it. Not every information is useful to everybody, therefore, it is necessary for the government to know the type of information that the citizens want to hear from them in order to provide it to them for democracy to reign. Citizens should not be ignorant of their right to information, especially, public information. Therefore, this research is expected to call attention of the local governments' authorities to the need to adequately disseminate information on and about their activities to their citizens.

Local governments are the closest administrative unit of the Federal Government of Nigeria to the community. Local governments are established to bring government to the grassroots level. It is the third tier of government in Nigeria after the Federal and State governments. So Local Governments are meant to be the government of the people particularly (the Rural Dwellers). In addition to the visible activities of the local governments, the local governments are to communicate their invisible activities to their citizens. The visible activities are road construction, electricity, pipe borne water, market stalls, abattoirs, and other tangible works done for the communities. The invisible activities are the administrative planning and the politicking involved in government. The citizens need to know all these. Not only do the citizens need to have information about the local governments, they need to have the information they require.

Information Dissemination Techniques in the Local Governments

Traditional media and new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) like cellular phones have played a major role in diffusing information to rural communities. Traditional media have been used very successfully in developing countries. To speed up the flow of information, prints, videos, televisions, films, slides, pictures, exhibitions and demonstrations have been used and should continue to be used especially in rural areas where the Local government belong (Munyua, 2000). Because the rural dwellers do not have the prerequisite knowledge to handle modern communication gadgets these traditional methods should be encouraged.

Aluko (2004), venting his displeasure on local governments' corruption, believed that restricted access to information on the workings of the government has given rise to poor understanding by civil society of the primary purpose of government. He suggested that access to information on the tasks, objectives and activities of the different organs of government must be provided and, by this, transparency is promoted. He further recommended that the masses, that is, the citizenry should be involved in the activities of the government. Also, the mass media and NGOs should be involved. Further recommendations are that there should be community relation and introduction of Civics in school curriculum especially in primary and secondary schools. An essential ingredient to induce accountability is free press that makes it possible for the citizens to be well informed about the performance of the government; its strength and its weaknesses.

In the United Kingdom, the GeoPlace Exemplar Awards, an award given to an association that disseminates the most impacting information to the society, is attracting attention in the UK. Other organizations like Society for IT Management (Socitm), UK Location, the Local Government Association (LGA) and Ordinances Survey have come to support this kind of award (PR.com, 2012). The Local Government Association was vocal in expressing their support for the award. They were there to support, promote and improve local government and to assist them to deliver better value for money services (PR.com, 2012:1). This goes to show the importance laid on appropriate information dissemination.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative method of research was applied using survey design. Multistage sampling was used to select 1840 respondents from 13 out of 27 local government areas of Imo state, Nigeria. Imo State has 27 local government areas with a total population of three million nine hundred and thirty-four thousand eight hundred and ninety-nine (3, 934, 899) (NBS 2008; Nigeriamasterweb.com, 2006). These local governments are distributed in three senatorial zones as follows: Okigwe (6 LGAs), Orlu (12 LGAs), and Owerri (9 LGAs).

The 13 proportionately and purposively selected local governments from the total population of 27 were approximately 50% of the local government areas. Fifty percent of the local government areas were selected because, the larger the sample size the more that the answers truly reflect the population's mind. The 13 purposively selected

local government areas have different numbers of people. So a proportionate number, determined by proportionate sample size representing the population of the selected local government area, was used.

Uzuagulu's statistical formula adopted in Uhegbu (2004: 102) is adopted to arrive at the formula used in selecting the population size for each of the 13 local governments.

The formula is expressed as:

$$\frac{n \times p}{N \times 1}$$

Where in this paper n = Total Sample Size = 1, 840; N = Total Number of Population to Sample = 959, 213; and P = Total Number of Population to be sampled in each of the 13 LGs. So to get the sample size for Aboh Mbaise, the mathematical application becomes:

$$\frac{1\,840 \times 98,326}{959,213 \times 1} \\ = 189 \text{ Approx.}$$

This formula was applied to all the 13 local governments to get each local government's discrete number from the 1840 respondents' sample size (See Table 1).

Table 1: Selected Proportion of Employable Citizens Surveyed from the 13 LGAs

Local Govt. Area	Total Population Of the LGA	Worked Out Pop. No. To be Used (50%)	Finite No. Of Pop. To be Surveyed
Aboh Mbaise	196, 652	98, 326	189
Ahiazu Mbaise	170, 902	85, 451	164
Ehime Mbano	130, 931	65, 465	126
Ezinihitte Mbaise	165, 593	82, 796	159
Ideato North	158, 406	79, 203	152
Ideato South	159, 879	79, 939	153
Isiala Mbano	198, 736	99, 368	190
Owerri Municipal	127, 213	63, 606	122
Nkwere	80, 152	40, 076	77
Obowu	118, 114	59, 057	113
Ohaji/Egbema	182, 538	91, 269	175
Oru East	111, 822	55, 911	107
Oru West	117, 492	58, 746	113

GRAND TOTAL: 1840

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The questionnaire titled "Perceived Effect of Citizens' Awareness and Use of Information About Local Government Finances on Their Participation in Development in Imo State, Nigeria" was the main instrument used in the research. This questionnaire was designed to collect other data but this was part of the data collected.

PROCEDURE FOR DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

One thousand eight hundred and forty (1, 840) copies of the questionnaire were administered with the help of six research assistants who were given two days training by the researcher and guided on what to do. These 1, 840 copies of questionnaire were distributed to the citizens in the 13 selected local government areas. Simple descriptive statistical analysis was applied in analysing the data collected, using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and respondents' answers to the research questions were represented in charts and tables in discrete figures and in percentages as deemed appropriate.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSES AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of Data

Of the 1840 copies of questionnaire distributed to all the categories of respondents, 1785 were retrieved while 55 could not be retrieved; this makes a response rate of 95%. So, the analysis was based on the data from the total retrieved.

Demographic Data of Respondents

Majority of the respondents (767; 43.0%) were between 31-40 years while the least population of the sample (19; ≈ 1%) were within the age bracket of 15-20 years. Thus, majority of the respondents were of productive age of less than 64 years. Fifteen percent of the respondents (271; 15.2%) had Primary Six Education while others had School Certificate Examination certificate and above.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data collected from the questionnaire were analysed, discussed and inferences made in this section.

Types of Information Respondents Expect From Their Local Governments

Local governments communicate the information they want to, while the citizens may need otherwise. This segment of the questionnaire gets responses on citizens preferred information from the local governments, especially financial.

Table 2: Respondents' preferred local government information

S/N	Variables	Important	N/important
1	Income information from the Federal Government to the LGA	1703 (95.4%)	82 (4.6%)
2	Income information from the State Govt. to the LGA	1646 (92.2%)	139 (7.8%)
3	Information on income generated from the LGA	1595 (89.4%)	190 (10.6%)
4	Information about development projects in the LGA	1603 (89.8%)	182 (10.2%)
5	Information about employment opportunities in the LGA	1579 (88.5%)	206 (11.5%)
6	Information about company and factory to be built	1588 (89.0%)	197 (11.0%)
7	Information on job/employment vacancies	1576 (88.3%)	209 (11.7%)
8	Information on meeting to decide on project to embark on in the LGA	1445 (81.0%)	340 (19.0%)
9	Information on how local government spends its income/money	1510 (84.6%)	275 (15.4%)
10	Information on election and voting	1524 (85.4%)	261 (14.6%)
11	Information on how to train citizens for gainful employment	1662 (93.1%)	123 (6.9%)

N/Important = not important, N = 1785.

From Table 2, over 80 percent of the respondents preferred all the available types of their local governments' financial information. The five most preferred financial information by the citizens are those from the Federal Government (1703; 95.4%), how to train citizens for gainful employment (1662; 93.1%), on income from the State Government (1646; 92.2%), information about development projects in the local government (1603, 89.8%) and information on local government's internally generated funds (1595, 89.4%). The fact that information on the training of citizens was one of the most preferred five, is a strong indication that the citizenry needed employment. This showed how eager the citizens were in knowing about the funds generated in their local governments, and on its use in provision of means of employment. This information needs to be communicated to the citizens.

Types of Information Respondents Received From Their Local Governments

Here, the type of actual information citizens receive from their local governments are considered.

Table 3: Type of information citizens received from their local government

S/N	Types of information received	Yes	No
1	Income from the Federal Govt. to the LGA	1156 (64.8%)	629 (35.2%)
2	Income from the State Govt. to the LGA	1068 (59.8%)	717 (40.2%)
3	Income generated from the LGA	1128 (63.2%)	657 (36.8%)
4	About Development Projects in the LGA	1197 (67.1%)	588 (32.9%)
5	About Employment Opportunities in the LGA	1164 (65.2%)	621 (34.8%)
6	Company and factory to be built	1034 (57.9%)	751 (42.1%)
7	Information on Job/Employment Vacancies	805 (45.1%)	980 (54.9%)
8	Meeting to decide on project to embark on in the LG	1029 (57.6%)	756 (42.4%)
9	How Local Government spends its income/money	868 (48.6%)	917 (51.4%)
10	Information on Election and voting	1230 (68.9%)	555 (31.1%)
11	How to train citizens for gainful employment	907 (50.8%)	878 (49.25%)
12	Need to pay taxes, licenses, and rates, etc.	1298 (72.7%)	487 (27.3%)

N=1785

From Table 3, over 60 percent of the respondents received information on: the need to pay taxes (1298; 72.7%), election and voting (1230; 68.9%), development projects in the local governments (1197; 67.1%), employment opportunities in the local governments (1164; 65.2%), income from the Federal Government to the local governments (1156; 64.8%), and income generated from the local governments (1128; 63.2%). The most received information was on the need for citizens to pay taxes, licenses, and rates to the local governments, followed by information on election and voting.

Comparing Table 2 with Table 3, on citizens' preferred information and citizens' received information from the local government respectively, citizens got less information than what they anticipated to get from their local governments. On financial information from the federation account to the local government where the citizens indicated 95% information needed, only 64.8% was received having a shortage of 30.2%. On information on job creation, where the citizens were 88% eager to hear about it, only 45% information was received from that with a shortage of 43%. Expected level of information in almost all the anticipated information receptions were 30% below expectation. This showed a big gap between type of information needed from the local governments and the type of information actually received by the citizens. If the citizens participate in local governments' activities, the local government officials would understand their information need and supply it. On the other hand, the citizens would realize what the government has for them. The citizens were detached from their local governments.

CONCLUSION

The type of information needed by the citizens of local governments was not what the local governments disseminate to them. There is a big gap between what the citizens would want to have from their local governments and what was supplied to them. This shows a gap that needs to be bridged otherwise there may be lack of trust and involvement on the part of the citizens since they are not given what they want. Financial information is the most needed information by the citizens so local governments need to give it to them in addition to whatever the local governments want to issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations have become necessary.

Information dissemination on local government activities was encouraging but the availability of financial information has been limited. Therefore, it is recommended that the local governments increase the flow of financial information to their citizens and show transparency.

Information centres should be created in strategic places in addition to those at the local governments' headquarters by the local governments. There should be information centres (even if it is a one room shop) in big market places, village town halls, vicinity of government facilities, social or health facilities, like maternity, school, stadium, and where there are big churches or mosques. Of all the 13 local governments sampled in Imo State only one has an information centre located in a market place. Not only will citizens be abreast of what happens in their local

governments they will feel the closeness of the government to them. According to Balit, Calvelo, and Masias (1996) such centres could serve as a convergent point for community's multifarious social, cultural and political activities. No matter how the information is concealed, the citizens will always be aware of financial revenue accruing to the local governments. Therefore, the local government administrators should not deny the citizenry their right to access information from their local government, including financial information. Freedom of Information bill (FOI) supports this.

The federal government should pass a law making it compulsory for the local governments to make their activities and plans known to their people. Every local government should be made to publish their financial transactions every quarter for public consumption.

With the passage of Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law in May, 2011 citizens should use this opportunity and be bold enough to request to know the financial and other activities of their local governments, so that they can participate in the development of their areas.

If citizens are aware of and use of information about their local governments' finances, they would participate more in the development of their local government areas.

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